

Enhancing Community Connections through Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

Nicol Turner-Lee, Ph.D., Fellow, Brookings Institution

Researchers have long argued that the metaphor of the “digital divide” (van Dijk 2002) has led to the oversimplification of the problem statement, conclusions, and disjointed public policy recommendations. According to data from the Federal Communications Commission, 55 million Americans still lack sufficient access to advanced broadband services and they tend to be historically disadvantaged groups, including people of color, seniors, people with disabilities, and rural residents. One-in-five African Americans, and 18 percent of Hispanics do not use the internet compared to 14 percent of Whites and only 5 percent of English-speaking Asian Americans, according to the Pew Research Center. Getting the hardest to serve online is perhaps the most challenging dilemma in the 21st century, especially since broadband availability guarantees citizens access to first-class citizenship. With the online economy affecting how citizens live, learn and earn, it is imperative that high-speed broadband access be a priority policy area for the U.S. Yet, the conversation should no longer focus on how to solve the “digital divide,” instead stakeholders need to promote “digital competitiveness” among disadvantaged groups to ultimately break the trajectories of poverty and long standing social isolation. Embarking on a pathway toward national digital competitiveness will require a multi-stakeholder effort that involves government, industry, community-based organizations, and people working together on comprehensive policies and programs that cultivate new pathways for individual and collective capacity building. The FCC can be the catalyst for a “Digital Competitiveness Working Group,” which would be charged with integrating technological solutions into much broader plans to improve local service provision and delivery, and ensure that the millions of Americans left offline can escape second-class citizenship.